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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM RS  
SUBJECT: A/S LOWENKRON'S VISIT TO MOSCOW

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1C. MOSCOW 6389  
1D. MOSCOW 7670  
1E. MOSCOW 7956  
1F. MOSCOW 8148

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Alice Wells.  
Reasons: 1.4(B/D).

11. (C) SUMMARY. A/S Barry Lowenkron visited Moscow in July attending "The Other Russia" conference sponsored by opposition political parties on the eve of the G8 summit. He also had consultations with a number of Russian officials, politicians, and NGO leaders. These included: Chairperson of the Presidential Civil Society and Human Rights Council Ella Pamfilova, Public Chamber Head Yevgeniy Velikhov, Open Russia Head Irina Yasina, Deputy Human Rights Ombudsman Georgiy Kunadze, People's Democratic Union Head Mikhail Kasyanov, and Republican Party leader Vladimir Ryzhkov. A/S Lowenkron also granted a number of interviews to both domestic and foreign media outlets. END SUMMARY.

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ELLA PAMFILOVA - PRESIDENTIAL HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL  
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12. (C) In his meeting with Chairperson of the Presidential Civil Society and Human Rights Council Ella Pamfilova, A/S Lowenkron recalled their discussion in January when Pamfilova expressed her dissatisfaction with the new NGO law despite her efforts and the efforts of others to improve the law's requirements (ref A). A/S Lowenkron asked for Pamfilova's assessment of the law, and Pamfilova detailed her efforts to ensure transparency, adding that she would not hesitate to raise problems with the law as she and other NGO leaders did in their official meeting with Putin.

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YEVGENIY VELIKHOV ) PUBLIC CHAMBER  
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13. (C) In his meeting with A/S Lowenkron, Public Chamber Head Yevgeniy Velikhov explained the operations of the Public Chamber (PC) and described its relations with the Duma and Kremlin. He said it was premature to predict whether the PC would become an accepted, permanent fixture within the GOR or whether it was an efficient process, but he was enjoying the experience. Velikhov mentioned that one of the Chamber's priorities for the year was to study philanthropy in Russia. He added that Russians needed to change their views toward philanthropy and start supporting NGOs, thus reducing the need for external support. Lowenkron agreed, saying, however, that before Russian philanthropy could really be developed, a clear legal framework needed to be set in place. Velikhov noted that the Chairman of the Philanthropy Commission, Vladimir Potanin, was scheduled to meet with representatives of the Ford and MacArthur Foundations in the

autumn. Velikhov also highlighted the problem of religious intolerance. He said there was currently a big push by the Russian Orthodox Church to become the state religion. Lowenkron stated that was an area of concern that the State Department was keeping an eye on. However, Velikhov said Putin would oppose such an effort because he believed that no religion should have special privileges.

14. (C) Velikhov maintained that implementation of the Municipalities Law, which had been passed in 2003 to eliminate corruption at the local level, had been a catastrophe. Revenue is now taken from municipal authorities and sent to the Federal Tax Service to be redistributed as thought fit by regional governments. As a result, of approximately 25,000 municipalities in the country, only 500 have been able to balance their budgets, most of which are oil and gas company towns, Velikhov said. The other 24,500 are now too dependent on central authorities for income. At the end of September, the Federation Council will devote an entire plenary session to the municipalities issue.

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IRINA YASINA ) OPEN RUSSIA

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15. (C) Open Russia Head Irina Yasina's meeting with A/S Lowenkron occurred in a somewhat downbeat context since Open Russia's website had been shut down that same morning due to lack of funds. This year, George Soros, Matra (a Dutch foundation), and Anatoliy Chubais had donated money to keep some seminars going, and Yasina hoped to receive a USAID grant next year. She told A/S Lowenkron about the organization's desperate straits but said she and her colleagues would soldier on as long as possible (ref B). Many people privately supported Open Russia's goals and ideals but would not contribute money for fear of retribution, since the NGO is linked to the imprisoned oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskiy. Yasina explained there were 50 partner affiliates in the regions, but only about one-third would survive because there was insufficient domestic support. She said their survival would depend on the mood of local authorities, who in turn were at the mercy of the Kremlin. Lowenkron added that Putin and his circle are deciding what NGOs are acceptable and what constitutes civil society, but civil society cannot be created from the top down.

16. (C) Yasina continued that civil society's main challenge was to make it through the next two years. She believes the situation will improve after the 2008 presidential elections.

Yasina noted that one of the biggest problems for Open Russia and other independent NGOs was access to the general public. There was too much anti-democratic propaganda on official TV channels, which promoted the idea that "you had freedom in the 1990s, but it was chaos; now there might be less freedom but greater opportunities for wealth and stability." NGOs had few opportunities to counter this kind of misinformation because they have been denied the ability to reach a broader audience via TV for the past six years, she said. Lowenkron agreed that NGOs' ability to affect public opinion was particularly difficult in Russia because of the high energy prices, tight government control of the media, and Russian officials selling the idea that stability and security should trump civic freedoms.

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GEORGIY KUNADZE ) OFFICE OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OMBUDSMAN

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17. (C) Deputy Human Rights Ombudsman Georgiy Kunadze began the meeting with A/S Lowenkron with a discussion of the U.S.-Russian Roundtable on Democracy and Human Rights proposal (ref C). Kunadze said that since it was Lukin's idea, Lukin does not mind being the Russian organizer. However, since the Ombudsman's Office is a government agency, President Putin would ultimately make the decision on whether Lukin would represent Russia. Lowenkron said that he hoped Lukin would take the lead on the Russian side and that the

Carnegie Center had been suggested for taking the lead on the American side. Possible topics for roundtable sessions could include combating corruption, terrorist financing, human rights violations, and religious intolerance, Kunadze said.

¶8. (C) In the second half of the meeting, Kunadze described both positive and negative achievements for the Ombudsman's Office so far this year. On the positive side, he mentioned that the Office's 2005 annual report had received good feedback, particularly from Putin. Kunadze was also proud of two special reports on disabled children's rights and educational rights that the Office had published. On the negative side, he was disappointed that the Ombudsman's Office had not yet drafted a report on growing ethnic violence in Russia. But, he reasoned, it was such a diverse and difficult issue to summarize that it might be worth doing a series of reports rather than a single large report. In addition, Kunadze considered the Ombudsman's Office's inability to prevail on the NGO law a major failure. He was pleased, however, that Putin mentioned that it might be possible to amend the NGO law by the end of this year, although he admitted it might have just been a pre-G8 gesture to appease critics. Kunadze said that in order for Putin to seriously consider amending the law, somebody first had to prove that the law was not effective, as well as to propose specific amendments. He said the Ombudsman's Office would be looking into this and that there would be an Experts Council meeting later in the summer, which he hoped would compile negative and positive examples of implementation since the law came into force in April. Lowenkron suggested that in-depth discussions of the NGO law and its implementing guidelines, as well as how to deal with xenophobia and extremism, could be possible topics for the roundtable.

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MIKHAIL KASYANOV ) PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC UNION

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¶9. (C) Former Prime Minister Kasyanov recounted for A/S Lowenkron some of the difficulties his supporters had encountered in their efforts to participate in "The Other Russia" conference (ref D, E). Speaking more broadly, Kasyanov asserted that Russia's image at the G8 summit would be a "turning point" and that many NGOs feared an increase in government repression afterwards. This would be particularly relevant for politically sensitive organizations involved in democracy promotion and political institution-building. At the same time, Kasyanov said some NGO representatives had become increasingly angry about the current state of affairs in the country and were beginning to realize that nobody would be able to defend them effectively in the wake of an official crackdown on their activities.

¶10. (C) With respect to the People's Democratic Union, Kasyanov described it as a movement and therefore not subject to the same registration requirements as political parties. In time, he hoped to transform it into a party. Kasyanov acknowledged that the Union was struggling to increase its popularity. He said many in the business community had quietly expressed support, but official pressure on businessmen was so intense that they could not be perceived as openly endorsing opposition parties or candidates. Kasyanov claimed, however, that his experience in government had allowed him to forge numerous ties with influential figures, as well as to hone his managerial skills.

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OPEN RUSSIA CONFERENCE

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¶11. (C) Assistant Secretaries Lowenkron and Fried were among the foreign guests, hundreds of opposition figures (from liberal democrats to National Bolsheviks), and NGO activists who met in Moscow July 11-12 for "The Other Russia" conference organized by United Civil Front leader Garri Kasparov (ref D, E). During the conference, A/S Lowenkron and Fried had the opportunity to meet many of the speakers and guests, including conference organizer Kasparov and

Moscow Carnegie Center analyst Liliya Shevtsova, and gave interviews to several foreign and domestic media outlets -- Kommersant, BBC, NY Times, AP, The Times of London, The Daily Telegraph, Reuters, The Toronto Star, and ARD German TV Channel 1.

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VLADIMIR RYZHKOV ) REPUBLICAN PARTY  
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¶12. (C) During dinner with A/S Lowenkron and Fried, Republican Party leader and independent Duma Deputy Vladimir Ryzhkov spoke about difficulties he was having in getting his party registered. He mentioned that new legislation had increased from 25 to 35 the number of possible reasons for excluding candidates from electoral lists and said that even Central Elections Commission Head Aleksandr Veshnyakov had agreed that the new legislation was too restrictive. He argued that if only a few parties were allowed to register and only three or four of the top ten most popular candidates were able to run, the elections would not be considered credible or legitimate. He said unofficial presidential contenders Dmitriy Medvedev and Sergey Ivanov both had about 7-9 percent in popularity polls, but they were shown dozens of times on TV in June, while Ryzhkov, who claimed to rank similarly in the polls, had appeared only three times.

¶13. (C) Another issue that concerned Ryzhkov was control of the Internet. He said the Public Chamber had recently raised the issue and was drafting an initiative that would provide for regulation of the Internet. There were over 22 million Internet users in Russia, most of whom were young and urban -- just the kind of voters the Kremlin was most worried about since this age cohort had been actively involved in recent "colored" revolutions. Ryzhkov pointed to Minister of Information Technology and Communication Leonid Raiman's recent remarks that Russia was studying China's experience with the Internet. While it might be too late to introduce such tight control in Russia, Ryzhkov predicted the Kremlin was nevertheless likely to try to do so prior to elections, perhaps using anti-extremism (ref F) or anti-terrorism themes as a justification for imposing controls.

¶14. (U) A/S Lowenkron has cleared this cable.  
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